



*a podcast about
how we learn,
how we teach,
and how they overlap*

Episode 44 - How to Take Written Tests (Essay, Short Answer, and Fill-In-The-Blank)

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

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And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 44 - how to take written tests: essay, short answer, and fill-in-the-blank.

Adam: So this is the final episode of our six-episode "All Things Testing" series, and Dinur and I have mostly focused on how to write these questions. But in this last episode, we're talking to students.

And students, we know, when you study for these exams, a lot of times you're going, "I hope I understand what I'm doing..."

Well, so, the thing is, there are strategies you can use, when you're taking these exams, to actually figure out what the question is asking - maybe even some clues to figure out, "okay, that's the right answer." But we want to make sure that you understand that there are strategies for answering written question tests.

So, when it comes to fill-in-the-blank questions, the first thing you want to do is read the entire question first. Sound it out in your head, if you can.

And some clues that you want to look for: what answer is going to make the sentence grammatically correct? So, for example, if the word before the blank in the sentence is "a," then the answer can't start with a vowel. It has to start with a consonant.

Now another thing you might look for is: how many blanks are there? If you have a fill-in-the-blank question and it's got two blanks, you've got to come up with two answers.

Now, some professors will give points for each blank; some will only give points for a completely correct answer - or not. So you might also want to check and see: does it say anywhere on the test "worth two points" or "worth one point"? And it should, if your professor's designed it correctly.

And then, finally, we all blank on words. I've done it myself. So if you can't come up with the exact answer, then describe it. For example, if you know that it's an apple, but you can't think of the word "apple" for whatever reason - if your brain has just decided "we're not allowing access to that part of your memory today!" - then just describe it: "a red fruit with white flesh." Maybe that will be enough to get you at least some partial credit.

Dinur: Now keep in mind, the very first step, even before reading the test, is: you want to make sure you've studied for this, and that you're aware that these are the sorts of questions that you're going to face, so that when you study, when you prepare yourself, you can think of, "Hey, if I were asking myself a fill-in-the-blank question, what might I ask?"

Adam: Yeah, and then you can put that on your flash cards. One of the things that we heard from Gretchen Wegner back in Episode 20, and that we have been emphasizing since: study in the format of the test. So if you know that you're going to be facing fill-in-the-blank questions, create some fill-in-the-blank questions! And if you don't know how to do that, go back and listen to the last few episodes that we've just done in the "All Things Testing," because we talk about how to design good fill-in-the-blank questions for teachers. This also allows you to design good, fill-in-the-blank questions on your flashcards, or on your self-quizzes, or whatever it is that you're doing.

Like, that way, you'll know not to put a blank where there's a non-important part of the answer. You want the blank to be the important part of the answer, right? So make sure that when you're studying for a test that's going to have fill-in-the-blank questions, that you make a fill-in-the-blank question for each of the possible things you will have to talk about.

And this may take a little time, but many of my students have come back to me and said, "Wow, that one tip? That's allowed me to understand how to study for these things, because I have to think about what goes in the blank."

Dinur: And that's similar to what I tell my students. When I tell them to prepare, I tell them the format of the test. Now, I tend to do a lot more multiple-choice and true/false, rather than these sorts of questions. But I tell them, "If you were me, and you were going through this material, what sort of multiple-choice questions could you ask? What kind of true/false questions could you ask?" So for this, what kind of fill-in-the-blank questions could I ask?

Adam: Mm-hmm. This could even be something you get your study group together on, right? Have your study group, "everybody brainstorm 10 fill-in-the-blank questions," and then you pool them all, and you use them to study with.

So when I was in high school, I had a chemistry teacher who not only did fill-in-the-blank questions on the test - and everything was a fill-in-the-blank question, which was really annoying, because that meant that we didn't have any multiple-choice questions that we could get a possible easy-guess answer from - but all of his notes were fill-in-the-blank notes. Like, he would fill up the entire whiteboard, and he would create an underline wherever he wanted us to fill something in, and he felt that it was forcing us to pay attention and take really, really good notes. I don't think that actually worked very well, because for me, all it was was writing his words in. It didn't mean I understood them, right?

So when you're doing a fill-in-the-blank quiz for yourself, when you're creating your own quiz or you're creating your own flash cards, make sure that the question makes sense to you, because if it doesn't, it's going to be much harder to answer.

The other thing you might want to do with fill-in-the-blank questions is look for cues - for words that might be clues to what the actual answer is. Because, for example, my students right now are studying aging, and so I had a question on the quiz where I said “_____ is the study of the social issues about aging.”

And so there's gerontology, which is just studying issues around aging - all kinds of issues - and then there's geriatrics, which is the medical version - but what I was looking for was social gerontology. Well, right there in the question, I had the word “social” and I was hoping that it would kind of act as a clue, “Oh, social gerontology, ‘cause it's social issues,” right?

There are teachers who will take pity on you, because fill-in-the-blank questions are harder and they'll give you some kind of clue in the wording that tells you, “Of the three possible answers that go in here, this is the one I'm looking for.”

Dinur: Now, fill-in-the-blanks are not the only sorts of written questions that we're talking about. We could also have short answers or essays. And right about now, I'm sure that there are some students groaning, because who wants to take a short answer or an essay test.

Adam: Right?

Dinur: Okay. Unfortunately, they can be part of student life. So if your professor or your teacher gives you the prompt or prompts ahead of time, make an outline for each question. Figure out, okay, “if I'm going to get this question on the test, how am I going to answer this?”

And making that outline gives you a framework that you can work with during the test, especially if you're allowed to bring in notes, because if you are, use your outline as part of the notes.

And if you're not allowed to, and you're going, “well, why the hell would I make this outline?” Well, you're engaging your study senses, you're writing stuff down. Hopefully you're talking this out, whether it's to yourself or with your group members, and that, hopefully, helps you remember this material when it comes time to writing the actual essay.

Now that said, you want to be careful when you prepare for essay and short answer questions this way. I would be very, very cautious not to share your outlines with your friends, even in study sessions, because you don't want your essays to be too similar to one another.

Adam: And that thing, I actually was just confronted with that this week. I had two students who were working on their paper together - and this isn't a test thing, but it's still similar. I make my students start very early in the semester on their paper and they have to turn in workshops that say, “Okay, these are my main points; this is what I'm going to talk about; here are the sources I'm using.”

So, I had a student who was in a study group with another student, and I was grading and I got both of their workshops, this particular workshop that basically gives an outline, and they were identical. So I called them up to my desk and I read them the riot act - quietly, because it was - group work was happening in class, but I basically said “Not cool, not okay.”

So one of the students came back to me just last night and said, “I need to let you know that that was my work, and I - and she asked if she could see my outline, so she could get an idea of how to do this, and she copied

me. And I will prove it to you, because one of the two - one of the three topics that I identified as things I might want to do, I wrote an essay on for another class, and I will show you that essay.”

So, she provided me plenty of evidence that it was her work and someone else copied it. The other person's going to get in a lot of trouble; she's not in trouble anymore.

And I also want to talk about how culture can sometimes influence this. For example, there was an article in the Chronicle [of Higher Education], and I've run into this myself, with students who are international students. In China, apparently, it is very common to write an essay and memorize the essay before you go to the exam, so that when you are writing down your answer to the exam question, you're basically just writing a memorized essay.

Well, the thing is, a lot of international students from Asia, especially from China, they work together and they study collaboratively, and they will all prepare one essay, and then they'll all memorize that essay, and then they all write the identical essay during the test.

And at first this kind of threw me, and it threw my colleagues, 'cause we were all looking at essays about the same time going, “Wait, how is it that they all wrote an identical essay?” And then we found out that this was the method that was used by students in China, that they all would write the essay together, and then they would all memorize it, so that they could answer the question correctly. That was the important part - not that they independently came up with the answers.

So be aware, teachers, that this may be an issue with some of your international students. And from their culture, it is not considered wrong to do that, because the goal is not to be the independent individual who got the right answer. It's to get the right answer. And if you studied with four other people and they all wrote the same essay, that's considered perfectly okay.

Now also, when you are going to be doing a written question, whether it's a short answer or an essay, make sure you understand the directions. If you're not sure what the directions are asking you to do, it should be okay to ask the professor for clarification - and it's a lot better to make sure that you understood what you're supposed to do before you start writing an answer, than to discover, when you get your exam back, that you didn't understand what you were doing, and you just went with it hoping you were right, and now it's too late and you failed the exam.

Don't - don't do that to yourself. If you can get clarification, get clarification. Even if you feel a little stupid afterwards, like, “Well, I should've known that,” but you didn't. If it was confusing you, you didn't know it. There's no harm in that. Just make sure you get clarification, so you understand the directions before you put your pen to the paper.

Dinur: Now, when you are facing that writing prompt, take a minute or two to give yourself a basic outline of the main points that you want to make in your answer before you write it. Write down the key terms that you think you want to bring in. Write down any ideas that you think are relevant.

And from my own experience, this comes from taking the qualifying exam. And I know I've mentioned this in the past. My written exams, or my qualifying exams, rather, were massive essay exams. It was writing three papers, 10 to 15 pages each, in three days.

And to prepare for it, we had reading lists that were - the lists themselves were 15 to 20 pages long, full of articles and books. The idea was, you read through at least most of it, you've got an idea of what different ideas in your field were, and you had to talk about them.

So it came time to getting that test, I had written plenty of essays around criminology and socio-legal studies; for one test, I'd written about institutions and organizations. I took that first day that I got the exam and I looked at the questions and I started making outlines. What articles and books could I bring in for both? What can I really write about well? Because I'd rather take that time early on - because it's a three-day exam, so I've got a little time to build up and I can spend that time getting all of the answers prepared - so that, by the third day, when my brain is mush and I'm exhausted, I've at least got something planned. And it means that I've thought about this answer before, rather than trying to tackle it for the first time as I'm writing the paper.

Adam: Another thing you can do, to give yourself some help, is to rewrite the question in your own words, and do that to start off the essay. A lot of students do this, so if the question is, "Define the concept of anomie," then your short answer might start out: "Anomie is defined as not understanding what the rules are, or what happens when a society's norms are changing quickly."

Okay? That starts out with a basic answer to the question, and then you're going to elaborate on it, because that's the goal of an essay or even a short answer.

So, what you want to do is make sure that you aren't rewriting it in your own words to the point where you change the meaning. So make sure that when you write the question back in your own words to begin the essay, that all you're doing is repeating it in statement form instead of in question form. Okay?

Don't get too elaborate, don't get too creative. Your teacher knows that this is the equivalent of a rough draft. They're not going to judge you for writing it very, very close to the wording of the question. And most of us know that kind of gives you a jumping-off point, to then start riffing on that idea and bringing in your main points.

Dinur: And related to that is if you get stuck and you can't remember that definition of anomie, but you've got ideas of what it means - you've got examples in your head - write down the examples! Because the examples can guide you, because hopefully in the moment you can say, "Okay, why are all these examples of anomie? Oh, now I get it. There's no rules. A person doesn't know how to act."

Or, worst case, some professors give partial credit - like, we can tell that you know what the idea means, even if you couldn't quite articulate it in that timeframe. But you certainly had ideas. You had examples of what it meant. And we're going to reward that, because, again, remember, a test is your chance to show the professor how comfortable you are with that material at that point in time. It's no more than that. It's no less than that.

Adam: When I was in undergrad in Seth Abrutyn's theory class - he was, he was a few years ahead of me. He was a graduate student before I had gotten to grad school - and so, I took his classical social theory class, and one of the short-answer questions was "Compare and contrast Durkheim's two views of solidarity."

And I blanked. I could remember mechanical solidarity, but I could not remember organic solidarity. I could not remember the name of it to save my life. And so I wrote, "Durkheim had mechanical solidarity and a different kind whose name I can't remember, but I know what it means."

And he - he called me into his office and he said, "You made me laugh. Okay, I'm still penalizing you for not knowing the term, but you understand what we're talking about. The term is 'organic.'"

I'm all "Organic! That's what it was!"

And he laughed and laughed because he thought it was so amusing that I had blanked on a basic term from Durkheim. And I'll still tell my students that story, that even if you blank on the term, if you know the definition, if you can give examples of it, and if you admit, "Okay, I've totally drawn a blank on what this word is. I'm sorry, but I know what I'm talking about. Here's what I'm talking about," your teacher will usually give you some credit.

Dinur: Oh, yeah.

Adam: They may not give you perfect credit, but they will give you some credit, and you'll have given them an amusing moment where they say, "I've known this for years, but I can remember what it was like when I blanked on that."

Dinur: I give partial points based on honesty. I've had students who said, "I don't know," and I've said, "I at least appreciate your honesty. You'll get one point out of five for that."

Adam: Yeah.

Dinur: Why? Because you're not wasting my time and you didn't waste yours. And I appreciate that.

Adam: Speaking of honesty, I just gave a writer's workshop to my students on proofreading in the last couple of days. And one of the things I asked was, "So, what surprised you most about the workshop?"

Well, one of the don't-trust-your-spellchecker examples I had given them was that "the patriarchy explodes women," and what the student meant, of course, was "exploited." Well, so, I asked, "What surprised you about this workshop?"

And they said, "I never knew the patriarchy was about exploding women." And then they put "joke" to make sure I understood that they were joking.

And so if you can show your teacher, "Okay, I know, I blew it, but I've got a sense of humor," it might help you a little bit with getting a couple of extra points, or a little bit of credit.

Dinur: Now, if you have to handwrite your exam, and I realize this is a lot coming from someone whose handwriting looks like a three year old on speed -

Adam: No, no, a three year old doctor on speed. *laughs*

Dinur: A three year old doctor.

Adam: Because doctors have, yeah -

Dinur: But try to write clearly and tidily, because if your professor can't read your answers there, no way they can give you credit for that answer.

Adam: And you might try just adopting block printing.

Dinur: Yeah.

Adam: A lot of my students do. Now, have set this up - teachers, you might want to think about this - I've set it up so that students can submit any written exam online, so that they don't have to worry about their handwriting. Handwriting is one of those things that, yeah, it may still be kind of important, but we have tools available to make it less important. Try to give your students some way to submit questions that don't involve having to handwrite it all out, okay? Because that way it saves your eyes, and your sanity and their stress levels.

Dinur: One thing you want to do, when you're looking at these questions is, you want to look for the verbs in the question and circle them, because the verbs can give you hints as to what the teacher's looking for in the answer.

A question that says, "Define the concept of projection in psychology" is not the same as a question that says, "What can we infer about a person's mental state when they are using projection?" Circle the important words, and if you want hints, you can listen to our Episode 38 to find out the buzzwords that indicate different kinds of expectations. Your key words in that episode are "Bloom's taxonomy."

Adam: You can also search "Bloom's taxonomy verbs" online, and you'll find tons of lists of different verbs that are basically tied to the learning goal of that question. And so, for example, I tell my students, "if it says define, this does not mean give an example. It means define. If it says give an example, you have to find an example." And, for some students, they thought that "define" and "give an example" were the same thing. And so we had to talk about that.

Teachers, you might want to actually guide your students before they take the test, and tell them "if my question says this, this, or this, this is the kind of answer I'm looking for." I did that one year and the essay questions improved dramatically, because the students understood what I was looking for.

Now we also mentioned, you know, make a note of the different main points you want to make. Well, use this format. Once you've got those main points for each answer, or for each paragraph in an essay answer: statement, evidence, summary.

So first you make a statement - and we're going to use anomie for this - so, "anomie is what happens when a society's norms are changing quickly." So there's the statement. That sort of frames the whole answer.

Then you're going to add evidence. For example, "In the period that led up to the French Revolution, the social norms the French had always depended on seemed to disappear. The common people could no longer depend on the nobility to help them when they were hungry or needed work, and the nobility seemed to forget that the common people existed, as they withdrew into their manors and palaces." So that's all evidence. That's all the, "here's examples and events and things that went on," that back up what I say about what anomie is.

And then, finally add a summary. "The most important norm that seemed to disappear before the French Revolution was the idea that you could count on the nobility doing their job if you did yours. The common folk quickly learned that no such help would be arriving."

And so this allows you to kind of set up your paragraphs, so that even though this is definitely a rough draft written in real time, you're making the points you need to make.

Now when it comes to the format, don't skimp. Do not skimp on your answer, all right? I had a student once, who, back when I was a teaching assistant - before the exam, our professor, the professor of the class, told me and the other teaching assistants: "Tell them I want to see about a page and a half per question in the blue book. Okay?"

And I've told about the student, I think, when I talked about students who think that an A is the only grade they're allowed to get or the only grade that they should get. And I said that, very clearly, in several section meetings before the exam. I said, "You need to write about a page and a half per question in the blue book."

Well, so one student apparently either ignored, or did not hear me say "per question." And what they turned in was a page and a half total, or about half a page per essay question, which is more like a short answer.

And I tried to be kind. I gave them a C, but they were not happy and they dragged me into the professor's office and demanded that the professor change their grade to the A that they obviously should have gotten. And the professor looked at this and he says, "Adam, did you give her this grade?"

And I said, "Yes, I did."

And he says, "Well, you're right, young lady, he gave you the wrong grade." He picks up his red pen and he draws an F on her exam.

And she flipped out. She's all, "You can't give me an F!"

And he said, "I just did. Now get out of my office."

She actually took it all the way up to the Dean, just because she didn't hear the directions properly or ignored them.

The thing is - she skimmed. She left out a bunch of stuff. And skimming meant that there was no way she was going to get anything better than a C - and really, apparently she didn't even deserve the C.

Dinur: And I had a similar experience, although it wasn't with a test, it was with a term paper. The professor had asked for a 6-to-10 page paper. Students were taking theories and concepts - this was a juvenile delinquency class - so they're taking these ideas and applying it to a movie.

And I had a student who was older than me, and I've repeatedly said, "Look, the professor is asking for six to ten pages, so I need to see at least six pages worth of material." And I said, "Please don't just give me a synopsis of the movie. I've seen the movie. I know it's good. I had recommended it for the class."

And I got, I think, about four pages talking all about the movie and nothing from the class. And I was, I was mean, but generous. I - I'd given the paper a D.

The student flipped out on me and said, "how dare you?" And I said, well - this was me as a teaching assistant - and I said, "Look, you gave me two-thirds of the minimum required length; I gave you two-thirds of the points.

I can't give you more than that." And I said, "And frankly, I could give you less, because I don't see anything from this class."

So she appealed it to the professor. And the professor - I had sent the paper in - he goes, "is this the grade you gave?"

I said, "yeah."

He goes, "I'm going to lower that grade." And he lowered it and he told her, "you don't want to look -" effectively, "don't look a gift horse in the mouth. You're gifted this grade. Why are you complaining?"

Adam: Mm-hmm. And in my case, I was told by the professor, "if I ever catch you inflating a student's grade again, you're going to regret it." So I never have.

And the thing is, skimping never works. Now, if you simply don't know enough, that means you need to address how you study. But please don't skimp. You should be able to make two or three good solid points in an essay, and at least one or two in a short answer.

Dinur: Now we've just talked about not skimping, but you also don't want to pad, either. You want to do your best to write clearly and hit all of the main points without overwriting or adding words, because you don't have time for that. And one of the things I always tell my students, whether it's with the test or with the paper, the faster you make your points, the faster I'll give you your points.

You know, I run into this a lot with term papers where students try and start out with things like "Throughout history," "Over the centuries..."

Adam: Mm-hmm.

Dinur: Or "Have you ever thought about this?" No.

Adam: Or "Since the dawn of time" - that's one of my favorites. I have, I had one student who used that consistently on essay exams and in their term paper and I'm like, "We don't know anything about the dawn of time. We weren't there for that, and there's no written history for that." Um, yeah.

And the thing about the padding, too, is it often comes from a fear of word count. May I elaborate on this?

Dinur: Absolutely.

Adam: So one of the things I tell my students is that when we professors give you a page count, or a word count, or a page length, or we tell you "your essay answer has to be at least three paragraphs," what we're telling you is that in order to do the quality of work we expect, that's how much space it's going to take.

And a lot of students see that as "I have to write three whole paragraphs. Oh my God, what am I going to do?"

But if I tell you "You only have three paragraphs, you have to say everything you need to say in those three paragraphs" - doesn't that change the way it looks? Now, padding it doesn't make any sense, because that's taking away space you need for things you want to say, right?

And granted, if it's an essay exam, it's not quite the same thing as a term paper, because a term paper, you get the chance to go over it and revise it. But even in an essay exam, if you've made a list of, "here are solid points I'm going to make" and "here are examples I'm going to give," there's no reason why you can't write three workmanlike paragraphs, if that's what's required for the answer.

And teachers, also, when you give these kinds of exams, it's a good idea to say "estimated need: three to five paragraphs," okay? Or "estimated length, three to five paragraphs," so that the student has some idea, again, of what you're looking for. It's always better to be transparent about what you're looking for, because it makes it more likely that the student can succeed at that.

Dinur: Now, in previous episodes, we've told you that one way of studying is by talking about the material to people that don't know your subject. Well, when you're writing these kinds of tests, when you're writing a short answer or an essay, imagine that you're explaining the answer to someone who doesn't know anything about the topic. That way, you don't leave things out by assuming that your teacher knows them.

Because, yeah, your teacher does know them, but you don't get to make that assumption. We're testing you because we want to see if you know this material. So pretend you're writing an answer for your mom, or for your best friend who's never taken the class and has no interest in taking it, but they're asking you what this stuff you're studying is all about.

Adam: Yeah, that makes it more likely that you'll get not just a quick amount of breadth, but you'll also get some depth. That's one of the best ways to impress your professors, if you can show them, "okay, you've taught me this well enough, and I've studied hard enough, that now I can explain it to someone else."

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Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 45, when Adam and I talk about how to handle group work and free riders.

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Adam: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

Dinur: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier.

Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!